

# **Multicultural Education: The Missing Link in Teacher Education Programs**

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## **Introduction**

The tide of demographic changes in the United States has affected most classrooms in our schools. As a result, some classroom teachers and administrators realize they must quickly acquire a comprehensive understanding of the ethnic, cultural, and social-class diversity present in today's schools. Otherwise, these teachers will face the difficulty of instructing effectively in classrooms comprised of over fifty-one percent minority students (Texas Education Agency, 1993).

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Many minority students are not succeeding in our public schools, and teachers are finding themselves in an increasingly difficult and frustrating situation.

Many teacher education programs are not preparing teachers to work with learners who are culturally and linguistically different from themselves (García & Pugh, 1992; Grant, 1989). In 1990, the U.S. Census of Population found that of the estimated forty-five million school-aged students in the nation's public schools, about 9.9 million school-aged students in the nation's public schools lived in households in which languages other than English were spoken. In Texas, language minority students constitute 39% of the student population (Numbers and Needs, 1994). As public school enrollment reflects the growth of minority populations, teacher education programs must reflect and address and diversity of this nation.

### **Traditional Teacher Education Programs**

Many teachers have been prepared to teach in some of the most prestigious teacher education programs in our nation, yet few have received training in multicultural education (Cross, 1992). Why are very few teacher educators concerned with the implications of failing to train prospective teachers to instruct students in a pluralistic society? Surely teacher educators are aware of the numbers of minority students that Anglo preservice teachers will have in their classrooms.

Few teacher educators have prepared future teachers for the reality of teaching diverse student populations, nor have they recognized that institutions of higher education have taken little or no action regarding inclusionary multicultural efforts (Tyack, 1991). Despite the public outcry for better teachers and better education, we have not yet demanded the inclusion of multicultural training for our future teachers.

Colleges and universities have a major responsibility to respond to the increasingly diverse society by preparing prospective teachers to obtain a more coherent view of knowledge and life, thus providing both personal empowerment and a social perspective truly reflective of the social reality in the larger world (Scully, 1986). This reality is the catalyst for creating a new perspective for changes in program planning and delivery in our teacher education programs.

### **Excluding Multicultural Education**

Multicultural education is still viewed as the "minority thing" since its

inception during the Civil Rights Movement. Many Anglo faculty view it as a "means of enhancing the self-concept of minority children who are presumed to enter school with negative perceptions of themselves" (García & Pugh, 1992). Few minority teacher education faculty carry the torch to ensure that multicultural tenets continue to survive despite the lack of interest and with the negative attitudes which prevail in higher education.

Many Anglo teachers who did not receive training in multicultural education as part of their teacher education program now realize that they are severely limited in the knowledge, understanding, and clarification of attitudes as a necessary basis for teaching minority students (Grant, 1989). Teacher educators assume that Anglo teachers will eventually acquire the prerequisite knowledge, skills, and attitudes needed to teach culturally and linguistically different students (Contreras, 1988), but many of these teachers spend years attempting to teach minority students effectively if at all. Many endeavor to project the appearance of knowing how to teach minority students while in reality, they may not be sure (Grant, 1989). Both veteran and novice teachers have begun to request instruction or in-service training so they can better understand the cultures of the different ethnic groups found in America's schools.

It is imperative that public school teachers and administrators feel comfortable with students of all ethnic groups despite existing ethnic and cultural differences. My intent in this study was to investigate: (a) whether teachers and administrators in North Central Texas have received any kind of multicultural training in their teacher education programs, and (b) what type of training they received, if any. This region has had a vast increase in the Hispanic population in the last five years. Large numbers of Mexican immigrants have made their way to find employment in dairies in this region. Teacher education programs serving this rural area have yet to fully realize the need for multicultural education, yet the public school teachers and administrators are already requesting training in teaching the wave of recent immigrants.

## **Methodology**

### **Subjects**

Subjects were students enrolled in a graduate educational sociology course from a predominantly White institution (94%) in rural Texas. The subjects were completing master's degrees in administration, secondary or elementary education, or working on administrative or counseling certificates. Over a two

year period, all students who enrolled in this graduate course were subjects in this study. A total of one hundred and seven students participated in the survey.

Only one or two minority graduate students were enrolled in the course each semester. The majority of the White graduate students enrolled had experienced little contact, if any, with minorities in general. In fact, the only contact with minorities that several of the subjects had experienced was with minority students, school custodians, or teacher aides in their current school settings.

### **Questionnaire**

The subjects completed an eleven-item questionnaire on multiculturalism. The questionnaire consisted of demographic information such as age, gender, ethnicity, highest level of educational attainment, years of experience in the teaching profession, and present position in public schools. Other items included questions pertaining to multicultural coursework or training such as college courses or methodology courses on multicultural education, staff development, or in-services on multicultural education; also included were two open-ended questions. The first question asked the subjects to explain their definition of multicultural education, and the second question asked the subjects to state the relative importance of implementing multicultural components in the school curricula.

### **Results**

The discussion pertaining to results on the multiculturalism questionnaire will be divided into three broad areas which the questionnaire was designed to assess: demographic profile, previous coursework or training on multicultural education, and the importance of implementing multicultural education.

#### **Demographic Profile**

Of the one hundred and seven subjects, 42 (39.3%) were male and 65 (60.7%) were female. Ninety-nine (92.5%) were Anglo American, five (4.7%) were Mexican American, two (1.9%) were Native American, and one (.9) was African American. Thirty-four subjects were between the ages of 25-30, twenty-one were between the ages of 31-35, twenty-two were between the ages of 36-40, sixteen were between the ages of 41-45, and fourteen of the subjects were

46 and older.

Six subjects indicated that the educational sociology course was their first master's level graduate course. Seventy-three (68.2%) indicated they had previously been in the graduate program and were working on their master's degree while eleven (10.3%) indicated they had a master's degree. Seventeen (15.9%) indicated they had earned a master's degree and were now working on either a counseling, supervision, mid-management, or other type of verification. Sixty-seven subjects were teachers, ten were school counselors, nine were principals, two were central office personnel, and nineteen indicated they were not a professional in public education (They were intervention counselors, instructors at community colleges, substitute teachers, or full-time students.).

### **Previous Multicultural Coursework or Training**

As was indicated by the questionnaire, thirty-eight (35.5%) subjects stated they did not receive training in multicultural education. Fifty-two (48.6%) subjects indicated they had a course they believed related to multicultural education such as an educational methods course or an anthropology or sociology course which addressed the underachievement of minorities, the poverty many of them live in, or problems they encounter in school. Seventeen (15.9%) subjects indicated they had attended a workshop or an in-service that focused on teaching minority students.

### **Implementing Multicultural Education**

All of the subjects defined multicultural education as they saw fit, with all subjects tying the definition to race or ethnicity. All subjects stated that it was important to implement multicultural education or multicultural components into the school's curricula. However, many of the subjects did not understand how they could incorporate ethnic issues into their teaching or how issues pertaining to the economically disadvantaged, physically and mentally challenged, the elderly, or gender issues could be incorporated in the content they taught. It was evident that even though they may have had some background in multicultural education, they had not been trained in implementing multicultural components into their teaching.

## **Conclusion**

The results of the questionnaire showed that most of the subjects (84.1%) had received very little or no training in multicultural education in their teacher education programs. Those who received course work related to multicultural education stated that it was isolated and fragmented. They indicated that their professors would present some information on minority students such as "how they have struggled economically," "how many have not succeeded in schools," or "how many continue to do poorly on standardized tests." They also stated that their professors did not mention "minority students" again during the duration of the course. Others stated that much of the information about minority students presented in teacher education programs was superficial. The majority of the subjects never had taken a course which discussed culturally different students.

It had become evident to the subjects that they were at a disadvantage teaching minority students. Some reported they had limited personal experiences with minorities in general, while others stated they never had opportunities to interact with minorities. They realized they had not been adequately trained to teach culturally different students. Some of these subjects had begun to request workshops on multicultural education from their principals.

Teachers must be adequately prepared to teach students from a broad range of backgrounds because they must serve as cultural mediators for their students. They must teach cultural expectations and culturally determined rules for success. Successful multicultural teachers have the capacity to understand the backgrounds of their students. They hold high expectations for all students and are prepared to use appropriate teaching strategies and materials that will result in optimum learning outcomes for all students.

## **Implications and Suggestions**

A paradigm shift is required to meet the challenges of implementing multicultural education in teacher preparation programs. Schools of education will need to restructure course content while faculty begin to reconceptualize this new approach. Most education faculty do not have a clear perception of multicultural education; consequently, many are not comfortable teaching about diversity and culture. Yet, these are the individuals training tomorrow's teachers for the diversity that awaits them. Education faculty must begin to understand diversity from a different context, for all faculty, not only minority

faculty, must ensure this new philosophy in teacher education is successful.

Integrating multicultural content throughout the sources of a field-based teacher education program would be the ideal approach for providing students the pedagogical knowledge, skills, and experiences for teaching in a diverse society. In a field-based program, professors meet the preservice teachers in school settings which provide early field experiences. Early field observations provide opportunities for interaction with minority students while also introducing them to other types of diversity. During field-based experiences, preservice teachers can begin to investigate their beliefs about teaching and explore the effectiveness of their practices, making accommodations when needed.

This approach, which requires restructuring most of the courses in current programs, allows preservice teachers to experience diversity in school settings while simultaneously learning pedagogy. Courses would be redesigned to be inclusive of the diversity in our society. For example, in a human growth and development course, students would view culture as a normal aspect of development and not as a "minority thing." In a curriculum development course, students would develop units and lessons with multicultural perspectives or create interdisciplinary or integrated thematic units where multicultural components could easily be integrated. A course on instructional strategies would be designed to help preservice teachers understand how to teach diverse student populations and aid in selecting and implementing learning strategies to ensure success for these students. Although diversity is defined broadly, areas such as socioeconomic differences, racial and ethnic relations, gender issues, religion, exceptionality, language and dialectic effects, learning styles, and family structure would be integrated in the courses.

A more common approach found in some teacher education programs is the development of multicultural contexts courses. These courses do not require totally restructuring a program. They are typically social or cultural foundations courses or introduction to education courses and usually the only ones focusing on diversity and culture. They are usually one semester courses and may not give students opportunities to apply content or to make relevant connections. If not monitored, these courses could become fragmented or isolated from the existing program courses.

Teacher education programs must enable prospective teachers to understand their own anxieties, insecurities, biases, and prejudices. Since it is difficult to modify the attitudes and values of preservice teachers, they must, at the very least, be given opportunities to analyze their experiences and emotions and understand their sources. They need to explore who they are and how their

perceptions about diversity could affect the success of all students. They can examine their own response to diversity through role playing or case studies as they begin to explore their level of cultural awareness and sensitivity. These students need these experiences to achieve clarity in teacher education programs before working with students, especially minority students (Banks, 1993).

If teachers are to effect the transformation necessary to become highly effective and competent, they need to develop the skills and competencies which will allow them to act on and transform their own environment as well as their classroom environment. The more teachers comprehend and thoroughly understand their environment, the stronger and more purposeful they will become as they begin to see patterns and connections that give them new information.

Multicultural education is an absolute necessity as results will produce better classroom environments for minority students as well as for all students. In this way, the potential which springs from diversity is capitalized upon in classrooms, for this potential can be used to create a stronger national bond.



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